

THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES LANGUAGE LESSON

Memorial Day

Stabilizing Indigenous Languages: When You Lose Your Language

G. Cantoni (Ed.)

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What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?

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The first paper that I wrote in 1948 on native languages had to do with what is the impact of bilingualism on students. There were still parents then who were concerned that if their children learned another language it would ruin their English accent. If you would hear the tones of another languages every time they spoke English, how would they get a job and what would people think of them? Today, forty-five years later, we are still not "home" at convincing public opinion and the authorities that it is worth having all the languages we have today. Therefore, I want to start with this question, "What is lost when a language is lost?" It is amazing how people are uncomfortable about answering that question. I remember my mother always telling me, "When you start off a talk, make sure people know what the question is and ask a good question. A good question is worth everything." And I would say to her, "Ma, you know, Americans, they start off a conference with a joke. You have to tell a joke for people to know that you're about to speak?" She said, "Jokes? Ask a good question" That is an old Jewish tradition, if you have a good question, you have something worthwhile to worry about.

Attitudes toward language-loss depend on your perspective. When a language is lost, you might look at that from the perspective of the individual. Many individuals suppressed their language and paid the price for it in one way or another — that remaining, fumbling insecurity when you are not quite sure whether you have the metaphor right in the expression that you are going to use and you know the one that comes to mind is not from the language that you are speaking at the moment. So, there is an individual price, in every sense.

You can also speak from the point of view of the culture lost. The culture has lost its language. What is lost when the culture is so dislocated that it loses the language which is traditionally associated with it? That is a serious issue for Native Americans. We can ask it from the national point of view. What is lost by the country when the country loses its languages? We have had this very haphazard linguistic book-keeping where you pretend nothing is lost — except the language. It is just a little language. But, after all, a country is just the sum of all of its creative potential. What does the country lose when it loses individuals who are comfortable with themselves, cultures that are authentic to themselves, the capacity to pursue sensitivity, wisdom, and some kind of recognition that one has a purpose in life? What is lost to a country that encourages people to lose their direction in life?

Today, I would like to just talk about language loss from only one of these perspectives, the perspective of the culture. Because losing your language is, technically, an issue in the relationship between language and culture. What is the relationship between language and culture? Is it like the relationship of my handkerchief and my trousers: you can take it out and throw it away and put another handkerchief in? Or is there some kind of more substantive relationship between a language and culture? Even there, there are various perspectives. There is an "outsider," often disciplinary, perspective as we anthropologists and linguists sit and think about it. When we consider the relationship between language and culture, it occurs to us as outsiders, not being members of those cultures, what the relationship might be and then we try to gather insightful comments, even from the outside. There is a kind of lexical or, I would say, an indexical relationship between language and culture. A language long associated with the culture is best able to express most easily, most exactly, most richly, with more appropriate over-tones, the concerns, artifacts, values, and interests of that culture. That is an important characteristic of the relationship between language and culture, the indexical relationship.

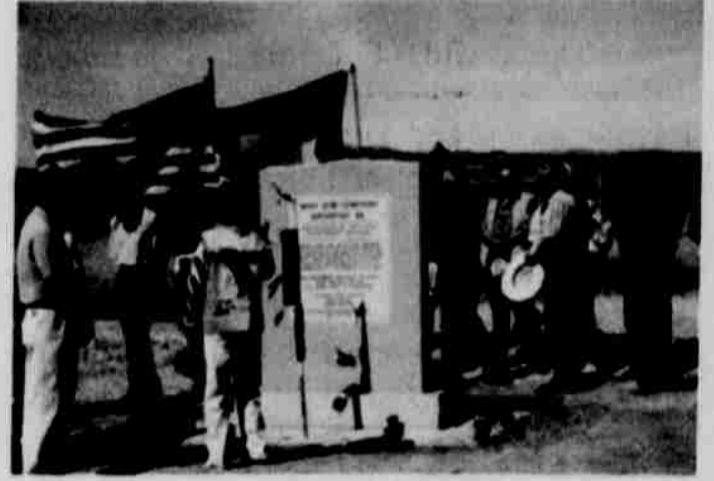
It is not a perfect relationship. Every language grows; every culture changes. Some words hang on after they are no longer culturally active.

"Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey." Well, who knows what a tuffet is any more, and you can not find anybody who knows what curds and whey are any more without doing research. Those are frozen traces. Even if there is often a good relationship between the words of the language and the concerns of the culture, there are more important relationships between language and culture than the indexical one.

The most important relationship between language and culture that gets to the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way. What would be left? When you are talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is the culture. That is, you are losing all those things that essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about.

There is another deep relationship between language and culture, the symbolic relationship. That is, the language stands for that whole culture. It represents it in the minds of the speakers and the minds of outsiders. It just stands for it and sums it up for them — the whole economy, religion, health care system, philosophy, all of that together is represented by the language. And, therefore, any time when we are at outs with some other culture, we begin to say snide things about the language. "Oh, it sounds so harsh. And it sounds so cruel" because we think its speakers are cruel or it sounds so poor or it sounds so primitive because we think they are primitive. The language symbolizes for us the whole relationship.

Actually I do not care much for this presentation of the outside view that I have made to you. It is a highly intellectualized abstraction. If you talk to people about what the language means to them, if you talk to members of the culture, they do not mention indexicality. They do not say anything about its symbolism for the whole ball of wax. They talk in totally different terms. And this tells you what they think they lose. They tell you some things about the sanctity of the language. Sanctity is not a little thing to throw around. At least, I have never felt so. Now sometimes you do not exactly mean holy — holy, holy, holy. But nevertheless, when people tell you that there is a cultural view of how that language came about, that it came to be when the earth was created, when the worlds were created, when heaven and earth was created, when humanity was created, they are giving you what you might think of as a myth, but the importance of it is beyond its truth value. That is actually the definition of a myth — something that is so important that you hold on to it because it has an importance beyond its truth. They may have the view that it was created before the creation of the world, as white fire or black fire. Every time the Lord spoke out, it came out as white fire or black fire in their own ethnocultural letters. That may sound ridiculous to you, but it is a sense of sanctity. People tell you things like that; ordinary people in ordinary Native American groups will tell you things like that. They will tell you things that have to do with the great Creator. They will tell you about the morality that is in the language. Morality is, after all, just sanctity in operation. The things you have to do to be good, to be a member in good standing, to meet your commitments to the creator. Some languages that are holy in themselves, and other languages have brought holy thoughts and holy dictums and holy commandments. People tell you metaphors of holiness. This is the most common thing, the most common expression of holiness that people tell you about their language. And that means they are going to lose the metaphor about the language being the soul of the people. The language being the mind of the people. The language being the spirit of the people. Those are just metaphors, but they are not innocent metaphors. There is something deeply holy implied, thereby, and that is what would be lost. That sense of a holy, a component of holiness that pervades people's life the way the culture pervades their life, through the language.



Taken at the Wish-Xum Cemetery. Spearfish, WA.

[Part of] June in North American Indian History

by Phil Konstantin

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<http://www.americanindian.net/June.html>

June 1st

- 1868: After the "long walk" to the Bosque Redondo Reservation in New Mexico, the NAVAJOs suffered from the poor conditions on the reservation, and from homesickness for their old lands. After numerous visits from Washington representatives, General Sherman visited the NAVAJO. They again asked to go back to their old lands. They promised to keep the peace and the old treaties. Sherman talked with them, and he listened to them. With a new treaty in hand, Sherman says he will let them go, if they sign, and obey, the new treaty. The NAVAJOs agree, even though they will lose some of their land as a part of the new agreement. On this date, Barboncito, Armijo, Delgadito, Herrero Grande, Manuelito, and others sign the new treaty.
- 1934: A legal definition of "Indian" is made today.

June 2nd

- 1788: Today, forces under General John Sevier, will attack the CHEROKEE village of Hiwassee. The American forces will be victorious, with many of the CHEROKEEs fleeing the area. The village will be burned.
- 1924: Indians become U.S. citizens today.

June 3rd

- 1539: Having been in Florida for only a few days, today, Hernando de Soto formally claims Florida for the King of Spain.
- 1833: Today, Secretary of War Lewis Cass gives orders directly to the United States Marshal's office to remove white settlers, and trespassers, from CREEK lands in Alabama.

June 4th

- 1647: Chief Canonicus, Chief of the NARRAGANSETs when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, dies today. He is approximately 88 years old.
- 1871: General George Crook takes command of the Department of Arizona, today. He believes the Indians should be treated fairly, but kept under control.

June 5th

- 1728: Today, DELAWARE Chief Sassoonan will address the Pennsylvania Provincial Council. He will complain of German immigrants settling on Indian lands in Tulpehocken valley. The complaint would not be resolved until 1732, when the lands were purchased from the Indians with trading goods.
- 1866: This day will start the formal treaty conference at Fort Laramie in southeastern Wyoming. Leaders from many tribes and bands will be present. The purpose of the treaty will be to allow passageway for trails, roads, and railroad lines across Indian lands. The meeting will be postponed for almost a week, at Red Cloud's request, to allow for the arrival of additional Indians.

June 6th

- 1885: Sitting Bull signs contract today to work in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.
- 1868: On this date, Captain D. Monahan, and troops from Troops G and I, 3rd Cavalry, leave Fort Sumner, in western New Mexico. The troops are chasing a group of NAVAJO Indians, who have been accused of killing 4 settlers about 12 miles from the fort. After following their trail for 100 miles, the army surprises the NAVAJOs, who are in a ravine. The Army reports killing 3 Indians, and wounding 11; the rest escape. No soldiers are killed.